

Music for a Cause

Chicago-based Tom Silva is set to release his debut album and hopes that his music will give a voice to the South Asian community, **N. Begum** writes

The war in Iraq, the genocide in the Congo, colonialism and cultural identity. Crucial political issues of our times, certainly. But these are also recurring themes in a new album by Clara May, a Chicago-based group featuring Indian-origin filmmaker and musician Tom Silva and singer-songwriter Nicole Sotelo. Titled "Hush," the debut album is set to be released April 19.

Born to Indian parents in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, Silva has a diverse background. He has writ-

me. The song is a call to return to our innocence and to realize we are a single race."

The songs, all of which are written by Silva and Sotelo, are set to a variety of music.

Folk from the 1960s mingles with world music, pop, post-punk, romantic ballads and brooding guitar numbers. The variety is a

and jazz music, who plays the organ and keyboards; Michael Sinclair on bass; and Nate Pusateri, the drummer and percussionist.

"I had the finest session players on 'Hush,' helping to coalesce a sound made of many musical styles," Silva says. "We wanted to use our combined Indian, Malaysian, Mexican, Chilean and European backgrounds to create a new kind of American sound."

The album was recorded in Chicago's legendary Rax Trax Studios by Phillip Amerson, a well-

known music producer who works with various artists to develop their songs and style. Amerson's ability to play multiple instruments such as guitar, bass, keyboards inspired Silva to go for universal music with 60s folk for the album.

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mainstream of American tastes and yet still deal with issues that define the South Asian experience. Our voice as a community isn't being represented and it needs to be."

In addition to the U.S. market, Clara May is being promoted in Malaysia and India. Silva says the group's website, claramay.com, has had many visitors from the two countries.

The group is also looking at the European market.

"Initially, we hope that our fans in Asia and Europe will obtain our music through digital downloads through iTunes, Amazon and our website," Silva says. "It is very important for us to connect to people in other countries because we believe in the notion of cosmopolitanism."

A cosmopolitan sensibility is part and parcel of Silva's life. Born in Malaysia, he moved to the United States, where he has dabbled in a variety of art forms – with a fair amount of success, one might say.

"I owe the successes I've had to my parents," Silva says. "They were extraordinarily industrious and talented people who emigrated from India to Malaysia when they were in their early 20s, leaving behind family and friends in search of a better life. ... My father, who worked for the British initially, became a very successful businessman. My mother was a highly intelligent, very thoughtful woman who completed her university degree."

Both his parents supported his creativity and encouraged him to be independent and to be proud of being Indian, Silva says.

"A generation later, my siblings and I replicated our parents' journey when we moved to the United States in search of greater opportunity," he says.

"The U.S. has been very good to me – it allowed me to make a feature film, start a rock band and continue my studies at the University of Chicago and to work in the world of business. It's testimony to the greatness of America that all these things were open to an immigrant from Malaysia."

So what's next for Silva and Clara May? He is already working on a new album, expected to be released next year.

He offers this tidbit: It will have a hard-rock song about Kanyakumari in Tamil Nadu. "We love being able to honor these places through our music," he says.



Hush: The Debut Album

ten and directed "The Quiet," which was named Best Independent Film by Screen Magazine in Chicago and premiered at the Art Institute of Chicago.

He has worked as a film critic at the Daily Southtown newspaper, a subsidiary of the Chicago Sun-Times.

He is currently enrolled in a master's program at the University of Chicago, where he is working on a book of short stories.

"Hush explores themes uncommon in today's indie music world such as identity, racism and ethnic conflicts," Silva tells Desi Talk in an exclusive interview.

Among the songs is one called "Hyderabad," that discusses race issues. It is available as an MP3 online.

"Last year I visited Hyderabad, India, it was incredible experience. I was surprised with its rich tradition and culture," Silva says. "Hyderabad' is more about standing in sacred spaces on the other side of the world – the mosques and the temples – and feeling the humanity of the people around

reflection of the different backgrounds of the artists who collaborated on the album.

Sotelo is a Harvard University-trained theologian, who writes and speaks on issues of equality. She is also the author of "Women Healing from Abuse: Meditations for Finding Peace" and is a contributor to the forthcoming book "Weep Not for Your Children: Essays on Religion and Violence."

Working with her was an "amazing experience," Silva says. Ten percent of the proceeds from the album sales will be donated to charity, he adds.

Also featured on "Hush" are Barmey Ung, a Cambodian-American composer who has studied Flamenco guitar in Spain, and plays classical guitar on the album; Marcus Smith, a professional church organist with an extensive background in liturgical, gospel



Filmmaker and musician Tom Silva and singer-songwriter Nicole Sotelo.